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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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During the past fortnight elections have taken place in Italy and in France. In both countries the results have been surprising. In Italy over eight million people have recorded their vote for the Christian Social Democrats. In France the M.R.P. (which has dropped the name " Christian " from its original title) has emerged as the largest single party.

CHRISTIAN POLITICAL PARTIES ON THE CONTINENT

The situation in both countries is too insecure to justify the hope that these election results will usher in a period of economic recovery and political equilibrium. In France the big question is whether the Communists will allow those who have defeated them a chance to develop their policy, or whether they will embark upon a wrecking campaign. In Italy conflict about the monarchy and doubts about Italy's place in the peace settlement darken an otherwise hopeful outlook.

It is no business of the Christian News-Letter to speculate on what chances of immediate success these parties may have in situations of incredible difficulty. The question we shall try to deal with in this News-Letter is the value and content of the adjective " Christian."

What we are seeing in Western Europe (for the M.R.P. and the Christian Social Democrats have an affinity with new party alignments in Holland and Norway) is the emergence of a *positive* alternative to communism. These parties belong to the Left in the sense that they are not reactionary but are prepared for radical action. The motive power of M.R.P. is largely derived from the young Catholic Left, a new movement in French politics on which Léon Bloy and Maritain, the French Dominicans and the Encyclicals of Pius XI have had a profound influence. They are also conservative in the sense that they want a return to the best in their countries' tradition especially to the supremacy of the law over power, and have a measure of conservative support. Their strength is derived not so much from a negative sentiment of anti-communism, as from certain sources of Christian thinking and from the experience of the resistance movements. In Holland a new alignment of parties has taken place, bringing about a much closer working between socialists and certain of the Christian parties. In Norway there was a popular demand that the leadership shown by the Church and by individual

Christians in the resistance movement should continue in political life after the war. A Christian People's party won 10 of the 150 seats in the elections last summer and obtained 10 per cent of the country's votes. The importance of the party lies in the calibre of its representatives, and in the fact that it demonstrates to the socialists the possibility of being progressive without toppling over into the arms of the communists.

The new parties show marked divergences from many unhappy previous attempts to translate Christian principle into political action. At last Christians seem to be delivered from their besetting folly, fittingly called by Eric Meissner in his book, *Confusion of Faces*, "archaism"—that is, the tendency when presented with a choice of political parties none of which are wholly to their liking to come down in favour of some totally unreal alternative, usually based on some idea drawn from the remote Christian past, and form a small party to support it. Nor are there signs of the other Christian fallacy which has had such mischievous results in certain parts of the world, that of bringing the Church itself into the political arena and using its ministry as political agents and its organization as a party machine.

THE ENDURING RESULTS OF THE RESISTANCE

The newly emerging Christian parties have been delivered from these false alternatives in different ways: from the first by the experience of Christians in the resistance, and from the second by the really penetrating political thinking which has gone on in certain Christian circles in the last ten years and is now bearing practical fruit. Christians on the Continent have been saved from unreal political thinking by being compelled in the resistance movement to take decisions in circumstances where ideally Christian behaviour was frequently impossible. They have had, for example, to choose between lying and forging and betraying a comrade to torture and death, and there has been no way of riding off on the back of a carefully worded compromise. They thus know in a new sense that politics, especially in unsettled times, frequently present those who participate in them not with choices (i.e. possible alternatives) but with dilemmas (i.e. impossible alternatives). This has been so borne home to some Christians active in the resistance that they have gone so far as to declare that Christian participation in politics must be on a basis of opportunism, every man being content to judge each event as it meets him and to do his best by the light of Christian truth when the moment comes. (See, for example, Philippe Maury's "The Political Realism of a Christian" in the *Student World*, Fourth Quarter, 1945.) This attitude was in the first instance a reaction against the real devilry of Vichy—its blurring of every moral principle and its quenching of the moral responses of the nation. The new French Protestant weekly, *Réforme*, which has

steadily enlarged its size and influence in its fifteen months' existence, reflects this attitude of opportunism towards politics, and never raises the question whether a stable political structure can be erected on such a foundation.

The resistance movement has also given the new parties something far more valuable than an academic understanding of communism or an emotional reaction to it. Unlike so many of those who applaud the conclusions of Arthur Koestler without having trodden the road by which he came to them, Christian members of the resistance know the communists as men, have worked with them, borne risk and hardship with them, even trusted their lives to them, and knowing them, part company uncompromisingly on the ends which they pursue, the philosophies by which they are inspired and the methods they are prepared to use.

CHRISTIAN POLITICAL THINKING BEARS FRUIT IN ACTION

The new parties also show the influence of the work done by certain Christian thinkers, notably Jacques Maritain, upon the fundamental relationship of Christianity and politics. These thinkers have succeeded in breaking down two false notions, one that the Church must either stay out of the field of politics, or enter it *as* the Church, and the other that the Christian must become schizophrenic in the political world, bearing the name " Christian " when he worships and donning the alibi of " citizen " when he votes. The way out of this false device and the discovery of a firm basis for Christian action in politics is most notably worked out in the appendix to Jacques Maritain's *True Humanism*, called " The planes of action." His thinking has had a direct influence upon some of those who now form the Christian parties. The position which M. Maritain first clearly defined was illuminated by William Temple in his Supplement to the Christian News-Letter in December 1943, " What Christians stand for in the Secular World." Briefly summarized, the task of Christians in politics is to understand and assert what the Gospel has to say about the natural order, about man as man and about human society. Out of this teaching springs the belief in the primacy of the moral law and of law over power, rejected alike by the extreme Right and the extreme Left and the acutest point at issue between communists and non-communists in Europe.

Communism has its grip upon men not because it is just a political programme but because it asserts a definite view of the nature of man, society and history. On a Christian appraisement this view is compounded of warped truth and plain error (though if he is wise the Christian will recognize communism as an inevitable corrective of the flight of Christians from certain truths implicit in their own Gospel—hence the importance of Lex Miller's *The*

Christian Significance of Karl Marx, which we warmly commend to our readers). It is useless to offer men as an alternative to a political theory rooted and grounded, as communism is, in a world view and having the power of a religious faith, either political programmes alone or religious abstractions alone. Without hanging a theory on a single fact, we may perhaps venture the question whether the loss of ground by the socialists in recent continental elections is an indication that what they really lack is a faith.

To attempt to draw morals for our own situation from the Continent is enticing and dangerous. Probably the swing to the Left which took place in this country a year ago is of less real significance than the repeated refusal of the Labour Party to admit communist affiliation. (See C.N-L. Supplement No. 188.) As Mr. R. A. Butler recalled in a recent speech, the strength of our political situation in this country is that our two party system is based upon a division *within* the religious tradition of the country. The Left arose within rather than outside the Christian tradition, and a powerful anti-ecclesiastical, anti-Christian Left has not been so far a factor to contend with. But there is no ground for complacency, or for finding it an unmitigated blessing, that this is a country in which Christians can find something in both main political parties to sit happily with at least some of their principles. This blessedness may be taken from us overnight by some hard turn of events. We ought to be doing the thinking now which will flourish in action later unless we too are to be content with mere opportunism.

THE SUPPLEMENT

For this reason we intend to publish in the News-Letter from time to time Supplements which are the work of a Christian Frontier group of Christians of both parties actively engaged in politics. The first of them appears with this issue. It does not attempt to be an account of what the two main parties stand for at present, but tries to show how it could be possible for Christians to belong to different parties and yet recognize that each had a distinctive and responsible rôle to play in the party system. The intention is that it should be followed by at least three more papers. One will discuss the general question of the Christian's political duty in modern democratic society, with special reference to party loyalty. Another will deal with those issues in politics of particular importance for Christians in the next five years. The last will deal with the peculiar moral difficulties involved for the Christian in political action, with special reference to the relation between power and morality.

Yours sincerely, Kathleen Bliss

CHRISTIANS IN POLITICS

I. CHRISTIAN CONSERVATISM AND CHRISTIAN RADICALISM

Party allegiances spring from certain fundamental attitudes towards politics. These attitudes are described in common parlance by such terms as "right" and "left," "reactionary" and "progressive," "conservative" and "radical." These terms are so bandied about that they now cover a multitude of fallacies and confusions.

It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to re-examine and revaluate these attitudes towards politics from a Christian point of view. We have called these attitudes "conservatism" and "radicalism" because they are less question-begging and likely to evoke prejudice than "right" and "left" or "reactionary" and "progressive," but we hope none of our readers will be put off from examining the attitudes themselves because they do not like the labels which describe them.

It is very important that this re-examination should take place at present. We are living in a time of vast legislative activity when the whole future pattern of life in this country is being decided. In such a situation our criteria of political judgment need to be sound and clearly seen and Christians in all parties need a firm understanding of what their party at its best should be standing for. When that does not happen the two sides of the perennial tension between conservatism and radicalism—which must be kept in being if our party system is to function—are seen at their worst, and the inertia of uncritical reaction confronts the cocksure self-righteousness of aggressive progressivism. The future of healthy party politics, and consequently of democracy, in this country may depend on the restoration of a true dialectic between conservatism and radicalism, based on the recognition that both are necessary to fruitful political development.

CHRISTIAN CONSERVATISM

One of the tests by which Christians must judge any political or economic system is how far it allows scope for those forms of natural association, such as the family, whose maintenance in relative independence of the state and healthy functioning are necessary to enable men to live as God intended them to live. A second factor determining the political attitude of those who believe that God is at work in history is a strong respect for tradition and continuity in the national life. Both these considerations might appear to encourage an attitude of conservatism in the Christian.

They have a special importance when, as at the present time, the State finds it increasingly necessary to regulate and organize more and more areas of life. There is a rapid growth, if not of

totalitarianism, at least of what may be called the planning State in contrast with the "ring-keeping" State of Liberalism. The parties differ about the pace at which we should move in this direction, and about the way in which changes should be made, but they are agreed that whether we like it or not, some transformation of this kind is inevitable. For this reason the first thing upon which Christian conservatism would insist is that the claims of other associations beside the State demand to be re-emphasised. Whatever plausibility the cry that religion has nothing to do with politics may have had in the context of the "ring-keeping" state, it is quite beside the mark to-day. Unless we can find distinctive Christian guidance for political action, we shall be driven to the conclusion that religion has nothing to do, not merely with politics, but with life, because increasingly politics touch directly almost every department of life. The State tends more and more to decide what forms of family organization it is going to promote and encourage, what the pattern of universal compulsory education is to be, and to what extent we are to be free to earn our living in our own way. Christian teaching about such matters as the family, education and the economic order has thus to be related directly to political issues of the moment if Christians are not to be involved in disobedience to their Lord.

Natural Forms of Association

What then are some of the natural forms of association which Christians, whatever their party, are committed by their faith to preserve (or, if necessary, to restore) under any form of state planning? First and most fundamental is marriage and the family. The family based on monogamous marriage is to Christians an ordinance of God, a natural institution fundamental to the true functioning of human society. The Christian will see it as his duty, whatever his party, to strive for the well-being of the family. In this he may find himself sharply at odds with others engaged in politics. He will naturally be revolted by the suggestion in some quarters that the family as such has no particular rights in society, and he will be critical of many well-meaning schemes which may seem to serve the family but actually only serve the particular interest of the State at the time. Christian concern for the family has tended to concentrate on questions relating to divorce and to pay too little attention to the urgent need in our present confused and complex social situation of creating the social conditions of healthy family life.

A second form of association is the school and the educational system in general. The need in this field for far-sighted Christian thinking transcending the denominational vested interests which have bedevilled discussion in the past is urgent. The Christian concern for education is not adequately expressed either in fighting

for the independence of an ecclesiastical system of education distinct from that of the State, or in agreeing uncritically with every "progressive" proposal of secular educators. The Christian conservative will further the efforts of the State to give all children an efficient education, and will be in sympathy with equality of educational opportunity, but he will be keen to safeguard the rights of parents in their children's education and will never regard the school as a substitute for the home and the Church.

Thirdly, traditional Christian teaching attaches a high importance to the institution of private property, which is, of course, not the same thing as "private enterprise." The reason for this is that the ownership of certain goods is held to be a necessary adjunct of responsible personality and the Christian conservative will be tireless in insisting upon the dangers to personal freedom involved in a State monopoly of the means of subsistence. The question of what kinds of goods can with most advantage be privately or publicly owned calls urgently for fresh discussion by Christians who will approach it in the light of a Christian understanding of human society rather than of doctrinaire economic teaching of the Right or the Left.

Fourthly, in a different category from the natural associations, but equally demanding a sphere independent of the State, is the Church. Here again is a vital question to which too little attention has been paid in this country. There are plenty of books about the relation of Church and State, but few that deal with the peculiar problems that confront us to-day. A. R. Vidler's recent book, *The Orb and the Cross*, is almost the first to discuss the subject in direct relation to the distinctive problems of modern society. This is a subject which the C. N-L. will take up in more detail later.

Tradition and Criticism

The attachment of a high value to tradition and continuity in the national life—the second of the two points mentioned at the beginning of this section—is natural to Christians, in the first instance because they are members of the Church. In the Church they cherish the traditions of their faith which have come down through the ages from biblical times. That they have a continuity of life with God's people who have gone before and a loyalty extending beyond their day and generation is constantly before their eyes. This attitude of the Christian will affect his thinking about politics in two ways.

Because he has been taught to see history *sub specie aeternitatis*, he will realize that a just social order cannot be built in a day and that wisdom was not born with him and those of this generation who share his views. He will be delivered from the hybris of progressivism. He will realize that no political order can establish perfect justice on the earth and that even modest achievements of

justice made by previous generations are not to be lightly taken for granted. Wisely to preserve the good is often as important a part of the politician's task as to reform the bad. There is much to be learned in politics from the experience of the past, and a heritage of political wisdom which each generation has to assimilate and interpret in terms of its own situation. Those who have had to do with political enthusiasts among the young know how necessary it is to emphasize this side of things to-day.

Secondly, the Christian will accept the fact that human planning can be effective only within certain limits. We cannot do what we like with the world. There are perennial truths of human nature and of the natural order that have always to be taken into account. Politics is not a matter of imposing our plans on the neutral stuff of human affairs ; it is the much more limited task of trying to do our best in circumstances which are largely beyond our control.

All this will help the Christian conservative in the present situation to see his task as essentially a constructively critical one. Bearing constantly in mind the famous dictum of Lord Acton about the corrupting influence of power he will be ceaselessly vigilant to insist on the dangers to individual liberty, which is much more than a matter of economics, involved in concentrating power of all kinds more and more in the hands of the State. This he will do, not in the name of the " individualism " of the familiar nineteenth-century type, but with a due sense of the organic nature of the whole community, which will enable him to recognize the legitimate place and powers of the State in relation to other associations as well as its limits. It will be his concern that freedom shall not be sacrificed to the modern passion for equality, and that carefully built-up traditions and institutions which have come down to us from the past shall not be carelessly destroyed because they do not fulfil the specifications of particular planners at the moment. This conservatism, as distinct from the slothful contentment with things as they were and the selfish and self-righteous clinging to privilege, which often claim the name, is an urgent necessity in the present situation, and many Christians should ask themselves whether it is not their duty to help in reviving it.

CHRISTIAN RADICALISM

The Christian's knowledge that human nature has been deeply wounded and is gravely perverted must have a far-reaching effect on his political attitude. It will certainly, as we have already seen, set him on his guard against the heady utopianism which believes that the Kingdom of Heaven can come with legislation, and against policies which fly in the face of human nature. But it will also leave him in no doubt about the extent of the evil and injustice in the world that have to be fought. His business as a Christian is to

fulfil Christ's law of love in all his relationships ; he has an inalienable responsibility for the good of his fellow-men. This he will seek to discharge in the political sphere by striving for social justice. Justice, it has been said, is the public form of love. In the complexities of social life the fulfilment of the law of love is as a general rule most responsibly expressed in striving for justice for all.

To establish justice will often demand radical action, the breaking down of firmly established social orders and forcing through sweeping changes in the face of bitter opposition. That this may involve hard fighting is no reason for eschewing politics. Squeamishness in regard to the rough and tumble of the political struggle is not a Christian attitude. In the Bible the Christian life is represented as a spiritual warfare, not merely against our own sinful natures but also against sin embodied in institutions, policies and those who hold and abuse power. The weak are constantly being pushed to the wall, and the strong are constantly devising subtle means of exploiting their fellows. The compulsion on Christians to fight for justice in an unjust world is so clear and definite, that those who incline by temperament to a conservative attitude have constantly to ask themselves whether they are not acquiescing with too great complacency in a social order fairly satisfactory to themselves and are not guilty of turning a deaf ear to the challenge of those who insist that the injustices of society can be removed only by radical action.

Traditional Christian teaching, both Catholic and Protestant, has had a conservative bias owing to the not unwarranted fear of the threat to justice involved in a break-down of order in society. It is true that revolutions often create greater injustices than those against which they are directed. But even revolution cannot be ruled out from the strategy of the Christian fight for justice, and in the modern democratic State a much wider area is open for radical political action by strictly constitutional means than has been adequately recognized by traditional Christian teaching.

The traditional attitude of caution is becoming less and less relevant to the conditions which exist to-day. Technical discoveries follow one another at such a rate that only by radical changes in its structure can society adapt itself to them. Far-reaching adjustments may be as necessary in the interests of a true conservatism as of radical reform. Uncontrolled technical developments under free enterprise, e.g. the motor car, may have done more to dissipate the heritage of well-balanced community life which we have enjoyed in this country than any deliberate government interference with the natural evolution of social and economic life. Radical political action to enable society to adjust itself to technical change may be forced on us, whatever political labels we may bear. The question before us to-day is not whether we shall have a planned society but what kind of planned society we shall have.

There is a direct Christian interest involved in the attempt to master by bold and sweeping changes the growing complexity of our social life. In proportion as the control of human affairs becomes out of hand and men are carried forward blindly by the momentum of the machines they have invented, we cease to be able to make responsible decisions about public affairs as those answerable to God for their judgments and actions.

Radical Idealism

We are concerned here, however, not merely with the radical political action that may be forced upon us by circumstances, but also with that which is needed to realize a social ideal. The conservative tendency is to be too readily satisfied with a tolerable order of society in the knowledge that things can easily become worse in the attempt to make them better and that, in this imperfect world, even a tolerable order of society is an achievement not to be lightly disparaged. History shows us many examples of this failing on the part of Christian people. Christians in this country have rarely condoned for any length of time obvious and scandalous injustices when they were happening before their eyes. But they have frequently acquiesced in situations which were only barely tolerable to their victims when vigorous action could have been taken to make those situations appreciably better. A vivid recent illustration of this attitude is provided by the behaviour of many Christian people in this country in relation to the appalling housing conditions under which many of their fellow countrymen lived between the wars. The Christian must always be intensely conscious of the imperfections of his society. Unless he himself suffers because of these imperfections, he can only do so by keeping an ideal of what the good life of man in society should be constantly before himself and identifying himself through Christ with his neighbour in his need.

This last point may turn out to be very important in the years which lie ahead if we do manage to remain at peace and to achieve a fairly just and smoothly-running society at home on the basis of the large-scale legislation carried through and projected by the Coalition and the present Government. In such a society the dangers of a new kind of conservatism might be acute, a conservatism all the more deadly because it conceals itself under radical labels, and thus evades the self-criticism which alone makes conservatism healthy. Once this society, with its inevitable tendency to encourage standardization and safe mediocrity,[1] became well-established it might become self-satisfied with peculiar ease and might resist any attempt to make it meet new demands or remedy weaknesses which became manifest in its structure. In such a situation, the Christian idealist

[1] This is not to say that society may not have to expose itself to these dangers in order to make available various social benefits to the widest possible number of people.

with his yearning for a perfect human society, whose idealism was so often misplaced and confusing in the years between the wars, might become very necessary indeed. When town planning has become a routine job and all the vested interests have duly arrayed themselves solidly behind it, we shall need new Ebenezer Howards with clearer visions of " the full life in city beautiful " than the administrators of that day have achieved and these prophets will need all their power to convince authority of the need for change. A socialist State in particular, once it is achieved, will exemplify many of the vices of conservatism in the highest degree and should such a situation come about it will be imperative that there should be Christian men in politics who will adapt the most radical attitude towards the most august and elaborate state machinery when it appears to be thwarting the well-being in God's sight of living men and women.

COMMON GROUND

This last point, which might seem to imply that a situation may arise in which those political groups which have up to the present expressed a conservative attitude should learn to take up a radical one, underlines the fact that in the present state of the world there are issues, beyond all party differences, about which Christians ought to feel a greater unity of purpose than ever before. There are fundamental human values threatened to-day which it is the concern of all Christians to preserve. All who believe that man is responsible for his life to God need to strive, no matter to what party they may belong, to bring back *the human measure* into politics. Our world has become too complex and we need to make an effort to break up the areas of life in such a way that particular jobs are made compassable for human beings, so that responsibility can be defined and some sort of control exercised over human affairs. The whole machinery of government needs looking at again from this point of view.

It will also be clear that Christians cannot be entirely at home in any of the major parties as they exist at the moment. None of them expresses very clearly either the spirit of a true conservatism or of a true radicalism. This is not to say, however, that Christians should be content with the rôle of marginal commentators on the political struggle, making an occasional " significant " observation but never having any part in the making of a real decision. Too many Christians who might have an important influence in politics have already allowed themselves to be forced into that position. Political action is of no use on the political level unless it issues in political decision and that means participation in party politics. Most of us as Christians claim to believe in democracy and in the party system. The corollary of that is we have a duty, not to retreat from the political parties, but to help make the party system work

at its best. One of the first steps which must be taken in achieving that is to restore a true dialectic between conservatism and radicalism in British politics. There will always be a place for the independent politician, but for most people this can probably still be most effectively done within the framework of the existing party system.

While this is so, however, three considerations will always be present to the Christian within his party, whether he be on the conservative or the radical side.

First, the Christian will recognize with peculiar clarity the relativity of party divisions. He will see that there is point both in a responsible conservative and in a responsible radical position. This does not mean that political fights are sham fights. There can be real and bitter enough disagreements on particular issues between those who share the same fundamental convictions. But it means that the political battle will not be a fight with no holds barred. There will be rules which both sides respect, and it will be possible in emergencies for both sides to unite against a common foe. The recognition of the relativity of party divisions is essential to the harmonious working of our political system. Once it is lost all kinds of danger open out before us, as we have seen dramatically enough in the experience of other countries.

Secondly, the Christian within his party will always try to see his party programme in the light of his Christian understanding of the world, which should give him a longer perspective and a truer sense of proportion. There are ways of handling a conservative programme and a radical programme which may make all the difference in the world to what actually happens.

Thirdly, the Christian should always be a critical member of his party. He should not suffer from the politician's vice of allowing the political shibboleths of the hour to serve as substitutes for individual political thinking on his own part. Although he may at a particular time be found among those who are advocating a conservative policy, he should always be a political pioneer who is trying to see things in a wider context than that of the political game as it is, and who is always striving to seek the will of the living God in the confusion of tongues and motives of the political struggle.

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